

Preventing HIV/AIDS: can web communication help?

Renae Desai, Murdoch University

Kai-Ti Kao, Murdoch University

Dr Katharina Wolf, Curtin University

r.desai@murdoch.edu.au, k.kao@murdoch.edu.au, k.wolf@curtin.edu.au

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The AIDS 2014 conference in Melbourne declared ‘that all women, men, transgender and intersex adults and children are entitled to equal rights and to equal access to HIV prevention, care and treatment, information and services’ (AIDS 2014). Along with declarations in relation to gender equality, anti-discrimination and calls for changes to law to support the rights of sufferers around the world, the Melbourne Declaration renewed global support to fight HIV/AIDS. However it was not made explicit what role communication and education would play in relation to these admirable goals.

One of the reasons could be the complex nature of any potential solution. Culture, society, economics and the environment play a part in the myriad factors that lead to infection. While there has been a global decline in the rate of HIV infections since 2001, this has not been uniform across the world. Indeed, there are two key factors that suggest that messages regarding HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention do not reach certain demographics. First, high rates of HIV infection continue to be recorded for young people aged between 15-24 (UN 2014, 35). Second, the rate of infection in developed countries such as Australia has been on the rise in recent years (The Kirby Institute 2013, 9). Despite targeted campaigns and improved health services, the rate of HIV infections in these groups implies that existing communication methods are lacking.

So in this context, can the online environment offer any viable solutions? Despite the progress made in combating HIV/AIDS in the last decade, not much has changed in terms of how the problem is framed. As the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals come to a close in 2015, the same questions regarding HIV/AIDS are still being posed: what methodologies should be used, and how can technology play a part? What is missing in this picture is an examination of what role communications can play in contributing to the fight against HIV/AIDS. We believe that in this context, online media and web communication strategies offer remarkable opportunities to both raise awareness and aid in the prevention of HIV/AIDS and associated communicable diseases such as tuberculosis.

Decentralised platforms offer opportunities for targeted communication that can capitalise on existing online and offline social networks. Social media appears to be playing an increasingly prominent role in health communication more generally, while on a global scale, mobile technology penetration rates are approaching saturation levels and mobile broadband take-up is rapidly increasing (ITU 2014, 1–2). HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns on social media have the potential to be more flexible and informative, personal and supportive, and may even be used to predict centers of outbreak (Young et al. 2013; Young, Rivers, and Lewis 2014).

However these are not without difficulties as the social, cultural and political contexts within which HIV/AIDS exist differ widely around the world, as does the use and access to various forms of online communication networks.

This presentation explores the role that web communication can and does perform in relation to HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, by drawing on existing approaches to education and community engagement and comparing and contrasting these with current approaches in developing countries such as South Africa, as well as developed countries such as Australia.

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